

"Putting on Masks"

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tamara Lebak, Associate Minister
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, October 31, 2010

You may not know but one of my earliest jobs was as a grocery store checker. My "Hello; how are you?" was usually met with "Fine" and often a smile and eye contact. Occasionally my greeting would be met with an honest "Not doing so hot" or "It's been a rough day" and I would offer an "I'm sorry" and a grimace in return.

The context of the grocery-store checkout line was supported by these pleasantries and genuine friendliness, but I will never forget the woman who came through the line one day. I said my usual "Hi there. How are you?" And she responded very seriously with "I am having a herpes flare-up." That pretty much ended my ability to be genuine in that setting. On a side note, there is nothing wrong with being honest about having herpes—I am told that one in five people actually have it—and being honest is important. But let's not lead with that story at the check-out line.

My checker friends and I would call people like this woman flashers. It's as though they were wearing a long trench coat and they would walk through the check-out line and flash us with nothing but a big sign under their coat that revealed "Too Much Information."

This does not strike me as an attempt at honest vulnerability. Being so revealing, so naked in an inappropriate context is using personal details to keep people away. It's like wearing a scary Halloween mask all year round. We need to take the time to build ground and connect before exposing ourselves, before we pull out the box of masks and begin trying them on for someone.

One of the things I love about being a minister is that my minister's role often grants people permission to skip the formalities, cut to the chase, and go deeper directly to the things that matter. Other times, finding out that I am a minister can completely end a conversation. They find out I am a minister and begin to make all of these assumptions about who I am, and assumptions about what they think I think of them. Sometimes I want to wear my minister mask loud and clear like when I attend a social justice event like a rally or protest,

when I am standing in solidarity with others—times when I feel it is important for people to encounter my role as a religious person first. When it is that important, I wear a clerical collar. (I would bet that for some of you even if I were to show up with a clerical collar on, that would be all you would see.)

When I choose to wear a collar I become the mask. It is intentional in order to help further some cause. I wear a collar when I am trying to make a statement, to get something done, so that I can bring with me the history and the power of the category of clergy of which I am a part. Because at a rally or as a prison chaplain, the rest of the details of my life are not what is relevant to the situation, so I save my face for the one-on-one conversation and interface with the world simply as clergy.

In our professional lives we put on the mask of our job for many different reasons. Nancy Leigh DeMoss tells a story about an actor who was struggling during the recession and couldn't get a job, couldn't find work. He was looking in the want ads in the newspaper, and he saw an ad that the local zoo was short on monkeys. He thought, "Well, maybe that's something I could do." So he went to the zoo. He applied for the job. He got it. They handed him a monkey suit. He put it on. He got in the monkey exhibit (Maybe this sounds familiar to some of you?) So this guy was an entertainer at heart; he really took the role seriously. They scratched; he scratched. They ate bananas; he ate bananas. Then he noticed that there was a rope hanging in the exhibit. If he would grab hold of this rope and begin to swing across the entire exhibit, the crowds went wild. So he would swing and he would do all kinds of acrobatics and tricks. And as an actor, he just loved this. Well, one beautiful, sunshiny day, crowds from all over gathered to watch this amazing death-defying monkey swinging back and forth on this rope. Now what he had not noticed was that right next to the monkey exhibit was the lion exhibit. As he was swinging back and forth, he went further and further out. Getting braver, he actually swung out over the lion exhibit. The crowd just loved it, until all of a sudden the rope broke, and he fell smack in the middle of that den of lions. The lions began stalking and pawing and growling at him. One lion in particular began to run at him in an attack formation. Our actor was so frightened he began to take off his monkey costume, screaming, "Help! Get me out of here!" when he heard the lion say, "Shut up, you fool, and put that back on or we'll all lose our jobs."

We wear masks in our professional lives for a reason. There is a context, an expectation, a service that people are expecting, even offering their hard earned dollars for. We often put on a mask at work in order to get the job done. We wear a mask at work because we are not free to be unedited. We are not free to say all of what we think or feel, especially in front of our supervisors. (Of course, I am talking about other people, Marlin. That is not the case for me.) This self-editing can actually be a good thing to help us learn how to be strategic in how we present ourselves. We must choose carefully and select when and how we remove our masks and when we choose to come face to face with others.

The Hebrew Scriptures address this issue of effective disclosure. In an inspiring story about Esther, (you all know about Esther, right?) we begin at a point when the king of Persia and some of his buddies have been drinking all night. The king decides he wants the queen to parade around before them to show off her beauty. When she refuses to be objectified by his royal drunken highness, she is cast out of the king's court.

And the king then begins to look for a new queen. Into the court walks Esther, this gorgeous and charming young Jewish girl who immediately captures the king's heart. You see Esther can pass. (Do you know what I mean?) Esther's beauty hid her heritage of being Jewish so it was not obvious to the king. Esther happens to be an orphan who was raised by her cousin, Mordicai, who found a way to gain her access to the king's quarters, but he tells her not to mention to anyone at court that she's a Jew. Esther follows his advice and is soon crowned queen of the empire. At one point, Mordicai angers the king's corrupt chief officer, Haman, when Mordicai refuses to bow down before him. Haman is a power-hungry tyrant and responds to Mordicai's supposed disrespect by convincing the king to let him announce a royal decree to kill all of the Jews in the empire. Mordicai sends a message to Esther that she must implore the king to intercede on behalf of her people. At first Esther is hesitant to step up. The rules of the day say that if anyone enters the royal presence of the inner court without first being summoned, that person shall be put to death.

When Mordicai learns that Esther is hesitant, he says, "Perhaps it is for just such a time as this that you have become queen?" In the end the Jews were saved because Esther was able to build ground with the king—build a relationship—and then she had the courage and

willingness to take the risk of revealing her heritage in order to save her people. Esther would have never gained entrance to the kingdom; she would not have had the king's ear, and therefore, the power to change the king's mind without careful and intentional disclosure.

The Hebrew Scriptures teach us that Esther wore the mask until her self-disclosure had a purpose. Esther was strategic and purposeful. These Scriptures teach us that the masks we wear can sometimes protect us and at other time give us the necessary power to help us save lives. So the question asked in the Hebrew Scriptures and that we consider today is to consider when and where we put on our masks. Is it for such a time as this?

Sometimes it is absolutely appropriate to save face—to not show all our cards at once—to interface with the world through a particular mask we are wearing. Don't be a flasher! We need the skill of decorum to know which mask to wear—what filter to use in any given situation--wearing the right face for the appropriate context. We can learn from the scriptures and from our experience to make strategic use of our vulnerability in order to build relationships; be intentional about how and when we show which mask. If what we are trying to do is build relationships, to have lasting connections, we don't lead with our most personal mask. People talk about the weather for a reason. We need to build ground with one another.

So what I want you to remember from our time this morning is: is this the right time? And is this the right mask? Sometimes we wear the monkey suit. Is this the right time and the right mask? Sometimes we wear the lion suit. Is it the right time and the right mask? Sometimes we wear the face of Esther. Is it the right time and the right mask? May each and every Halloween serve as a reminder to check yourself. Is this the right time? And the right mask?

Happy Halloween!